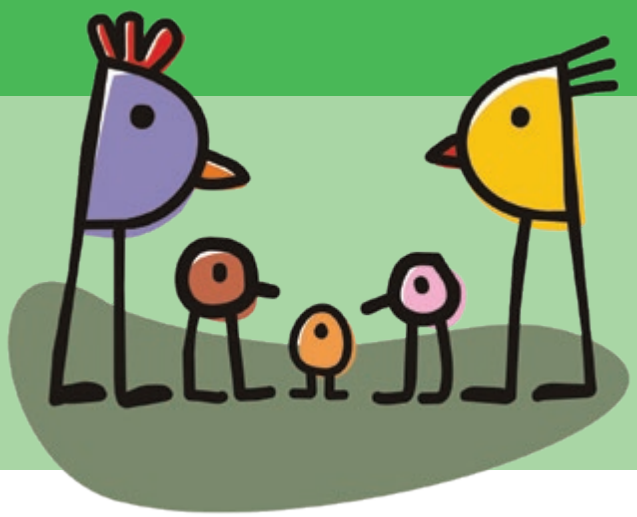
Empowered Parenting in Serbia:

A look at investing in Roma parents and their children



In Serbia, both Roma and Serbian communities call family homes "nests," and with their care, upbringing and education, the families provide the children with "wings to fly." Through the The Program for Children and Families Strong from the Start – Dam Len Phaka, parents enhance their ability to support their children's wings, so that Roma children can soar from their family nests and on par with their non-Roma peers.

THE CHALLENGE FACING ROMA COMMUNITIES

Almost 6% of the population in Serbia – close to half of a million people – identify as Roma. Marginalized and often discriminated against, the Roma community experiences higher rates of poverty and poorer access to health, sanitation, infrastructure, and educational opportunities.

Disparities between Roma families and the general population of Serbia start early and are difficult to overcome. This disadvantage is well documented:[1] Risk of poverty is nearly three times higher for Roma communities, as is the incidence of low birthweight. The child mortality rate is at least two times higher for Roma children. And in Roma settlements, only 6% of children attend early childhood education, compared to 51% of the general population; and only 64% go on to complete primary school compared to 93% of non-Roma Serbians. Facing systemic discrimination, challenging health and social circumstances, and limited educational opportunities, many Roma children are unlikely to reach their full potential.

However, existing evidence suggests that parenting and holistic early childhood development programs can support families and young children to overcome some of these obstacles. As children under 18 account for 40% of the Roma population,[2] there is pressing need to support and empower these often-vulnerable children and families to reach their potential.

Evaluation Overview

Program	The Program for Children and Families Strong from the Start – Dam Len Phaka
Country	Serbia
Sector	Parenting; Early Childhood Development
Lead Program Partners	CIP-Center for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP Center); Educational Cultural Union of Roma "Romanipen"
Research Partners	Results for Development (R4D); University of Belgrade; DEEP DIVE
Funding	Open Society Foundations Serbia (OSF Serbia); Open Society Foundations Early Childhood Program (OSF ECP)
Sample	900 families (parent & child); 450 in program and 450 in comparison communities
Research Type	Impact Evaluation
Tool	Save the Children's IDELA for children aged 3.5 – 6.5 years

This evaluation was lead by:

RESULTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY

DEEP DIVE

With support from:

OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

FONDACIJA ZA OTVORENO DRUŠTVO, SRBIJA
OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATION, SERBIA

	TOWN	RNGO's
1	**Krusevac**	„Romsko Srce" Krusevac
2	**Valjevo**	"Drustvo Rom" Valjevo
3	**Pirot**	Association "Ternipe" Pirot
4	**Vranje, Vranjska Banja**	Roma Cultural Centre Vranjska Banja
5	**Surdulica**	Association of Roma Intellectuals Vladicin Han
6	**Lebane**	"Arka" Lebane
7	**Beograd, Zvezdara**	Roma Women's Center "Bibija" Belgrade
8	**Bor**	Roma Youth Initiative "Gipsy Soul" Bor
9	**Smederevska Palanka**	Centre For Development of Roma Community "Amaro Drom" Smederevska Palanka
10	**Kostolac**	"Drustvo Rom" Kostolac
11	**Zabalj, Curug**	Roma Women's Initiative Zabalj
12	**Novi Sad**	Ecumenic Humanitarian Organization - Eho Novi Sad
13	**Novi Becej**	Association for Roma Prosperity Novi Becej
14	**Koceljeva, Draginje**	Center for Roma Integration Valjevo
15	**Kragejevac**	Ecu „Romanipen" Kragujevac

AN EMPOWERING SOLUTION

The "Program for Children and Families Strong from the Start – Dam Len Phaka" ("Give them Wings") was developed to empower Roma parents and young children. The culturally and contextually relevant program, delivered through workshops and home visits, sought to facilitate the development of stimulating and safe family settings for small children from Roma families living in informal settlements by enhancing parents' skills and abilities, so they can give their children "wings to fly." Children's development was encouraged across domains, with emphasis on socio-emotional development. The program was created by the CIP-Center for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP Center) and implemented in collaboration with the Educational Cultural Union of Roma, "Romanipen" and local Roma non-governmental organizations (RNGOs).

Throughout 2017 and 2018, Strong from the Start was implemented in 15 Roma communities across Serbia, reaching a total of 450 families with approximately 750 children aged 0 to 7.

A local RNGO implemented the program for 30 families in each of the 15 communities, with training and oversight provided by the CIP Center and Romanipen. The program was delivered in two phases, commencing in the spring of 2017 and 2018, respectively, with approximately 8 months of active programming per phase.

The Strong from the Start curriculum spanned three thematic areas: *Family and Community Roles and Responsibilities for Raising Children; Child and Family Health Protection;* and *Encouraging Child Development*. These topics were covered in a series of community-based workshops for families with children aged 0 to 7. Each month, parents and children participated in 2-3 workshops each,[3] as well as 1 joint workshop.

Workshops for children were offered for all ages, however, activities were primarily geared towards children aged 3 to 5.5 years, to support entry into the mandatory preschool program. The program offered additional home visits for parents of babies (aged 0-1).

The program was supported by The Open Society Foundation Serbia (OSF Serbia) and the Open Society Foundation Early Childhood Program (OSF ECP).

EVALUATION DESIGN

OSF ECP contracted engaged Results for Development (R4D), Aleksandar Baucal and Marina Videnovic from the University of Belgrade, and DEEP DIVE, to conduct an impact evaluation of the Strong from the Start program, along with a qualitative evaluation and costing study.[4] The findings and corresponding policy recommendations from all three of these studies are presented in this brief.

The research team developed a quasi-experimental impact evaluation to compare changes in parent and child outcomes for participating families with similarly situated families that did not participate in the program.[5] Evaluators and implementing partners agreed that the primary indicator of the program's success would be the change in children's socio-emotional development.

Each family (parent and child pair) was evaluated prior to program participation, halfway through and upon completion of the program (see Figure 1). An experienced enumerator contracted by DEEP DIVE conducted a survey with parents using questions from Save the Children's International Developmental Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) and the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS). At the same time, a trained enumerator from the family's community (of Roma origin) administered IDELA's play-based assessment in cases where the parent had a 3.5 to 6.5-year-old child.[6] This enumerator pairing allowed for both data integrity and a relationship of trust between the enumerators and the family. The baseline evaluation confirmed the statistical similarity between the children in the program and comparison groups across IDELA domains, including socio-emotional development; parents were also found to be largely similar, including on demographic indicators and attitudes about parenting practices.

CHILD OUTCOMES[7]

Children who participated in the program demonstrated higher levels of socio-emotional development, as well as total school-readiness. Children who attended more workshops had higher scores, even when adjusted for variables like age and education level of the mother.

1. **Children in the program gained an additional 7.4 months of socio-emotional development over the life of the program.** Children in the program group outscored their peers by an average of 1.25 points on the socio-emotional development domain, the evaluation's key indicator. In other words, **participating children gained the equivalent of 28.4 months of development[8] over the 21 months[9] duration of the program.** Importantly, these gains hold even after children enroll in pre-school which suggests they are an important building block to school readiness.

   Children's gains in socio-emotional development were positively correlated with their parent's increased use of positive parenting practices. Parents in the program group reported engaging in more developmentally supportive activities than their peers; greater engagement in which also correlated with larger gains in their child's socio-emotional development. This suggests that the pathway to improved child socio-emotional development appears to be through increased engagement in developmentally supportive activities with the parent.

Figure I. Evaluation Timeline

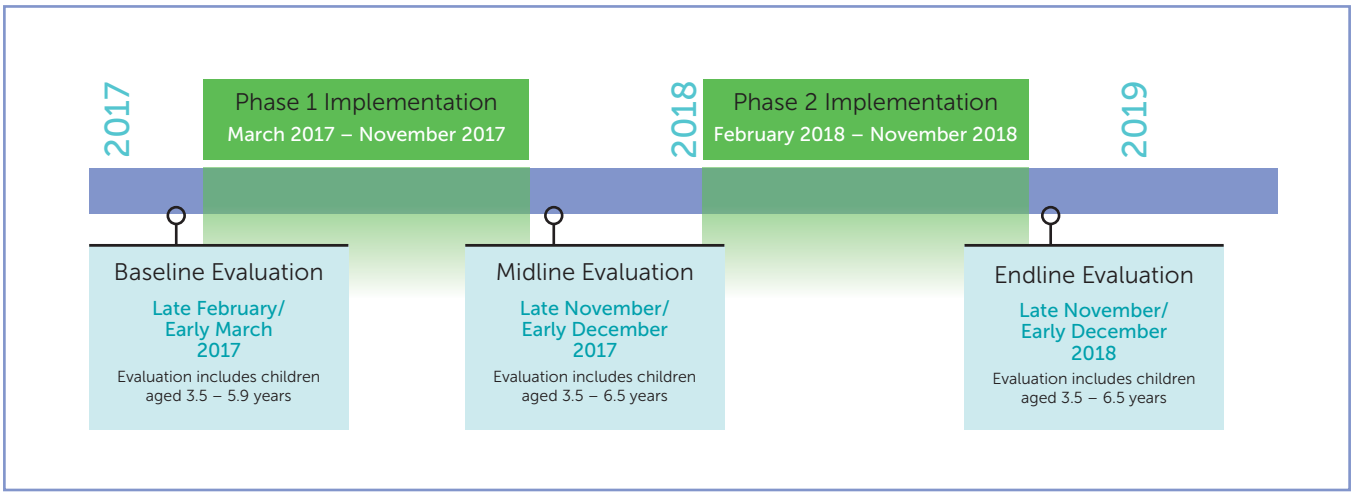
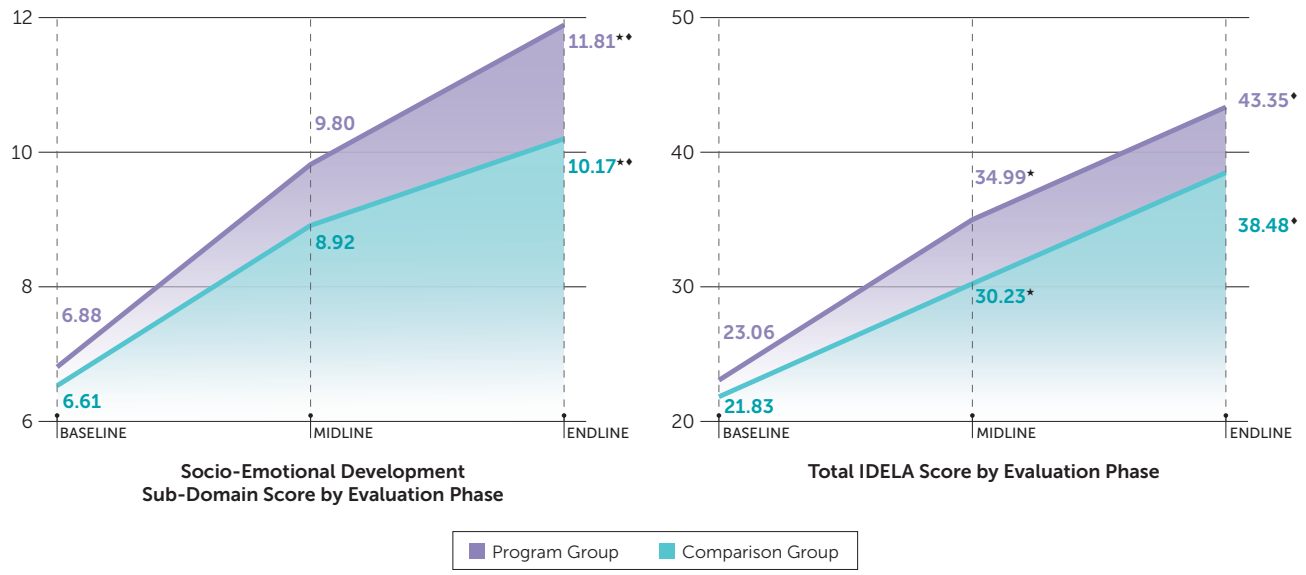


Figure II. Socio-Emotional Development and Total IDELA Scores



Note: A star (★) indicates a statistically significant difference in score gains of the program group over the comparison group between the current and prior phase of the evaluation. A diamond (♦) indicates a statistically significant difference in program gains over the comparison group from baseline to endline.

REFLECTIONS:
The Impact on Children

Parents reported that the program was of significant value for their children as they acquired new knowledge and skills that would help them adjust to school. Examples of growth included:

- Developed key skills like drawing and writing
- Increased curiosity - seeking out the "whys" and "hows" of their environment
- Increased independence, seeking out new playmates and engaging in more pro-social behaviors (e.g. sharing, taking turns, etc.)
- Learned or became more familiar with the Serbian language
- Entered school with more confidence

"We joined program, mostly because of language barrier. When enroll in first grade, most of our children do not know Serbian language. Now it's different."

– PROGRAM PARENT

"That socialization. I said at the beginning they were very attached to us. Now they feel more relaxed, self-reliant. My child started preschools with no problems."

– PROGRAM PARENT

2. **Children in the program gained an additional 4 months of development of total school readiness.** While children's scores all increased over the course of the evaluation (expected as children age), children participating in the program gained the equivalent of 25 months[10] of development over the 21 months duration of the program.

3. **The program does not appear to have a significant impact on children's early numeracy, early literacy, or persistence above what might be normally gained with age or participation in the obligatory preschool program provided by the government.** While children in the program outscored their peers in early numeracy, early literacy, and persistence, these differences were not statistically significant at endline as they had been at midline. As children in both groups largely entered the obligatory state preschool program at 5.5. years old, it is not surprising to see the gap narrowed, particularly as the preschool curriculum targets literacy and numeracy.

PARENT OUTCOMES

Parents reported using more positive and fewer harsh practices and while they suggested they had heard most of the information before, they continued to make modest gains on knowledge and attitude indicators. Larger changes were also positively correlated with program attendance.

1. **Parents in the program reported using more positive parenting practices.** These practices include developmentally supportive activities such as singing songs to the child and teaching letter awareness, and parents continued to build confidence in these practices throughout the program. These gains hold when controlling for parent socioeconomic indicators and others.

2. **Parents in the program reported greater confidence in their ability to support their child's development.** A composite measure of nine statements revealed increases in confidence in their parenting skills and agency in their child's development.

3. **The program did not have a significant effect on parents' aspirations for children, awareness of their child's disabilities, the home environment, or health practices.** Both groups reported less confidence in their child's ability to complete primary school than at baseline, suggesting this was perhaps due to an external factor, such as preschool environment, rather than the program.

REFLECTIONS:
The Impact on Parents

Parents reported that they heard and learned something new, but suggested the program had a larger impact on their children. Parents shared the following about their experience:

- Lessons on hygiene, nutrition, and positive parenting were influential – the content may not be new, but it was helpful to hear it again
- The opportunity to socialize, share experiences with each other, and receive advice about their child's upbringing was rare and extremely valuable
- Lessons on the value of shared activities and the potential harm of corporal punishment were appreciated
- Facilitators helped with school enrollment and other issues parents faced which helped parents have a more positive attitude toward schooling
- Location and timing of the workshops sometimes prevented participation, particularly for fathers, and for families without additional childcare

"For them (children) it was great when they were doing something with us. we were playing with dough and made various things. Then they would ask us how we were making that, and we would show them. I think in those moments both their and our hearts were full."

– PROGRAM PARENT

".... I was explaining [to the neighbors] that here is a future for children. Preschool is an important step towards school."

– PROGRAM PARENT

LESSONS LEARNED

Data from the qualitative evaluation complemented findings from the impact evaluation and allowed the program and research team to identify important learnings that will strengthen future program implementation.

1. **Regular attendance is necessary to see positive outcomes for families and children.** Enrolling families is not sufficient – ensuring participant attendance and addressing barriers to participation, such as timing, location, or provision of other childcare, should be constant focus for implementers.

2. **A strong implementing partner is essential.** The team highlighted the value of a local partner with the following characteristics:
   - Stable structure and enough capacity to carry out the project
   - Well-established, recognized and influential in the community
   - Knowledgeable of the specific conditions in the local settlement and community
   - Able to establish good relations with and gain trust of the families and young children

3. **The program curriculum and workshop activities must be well defined but readily adaptable.** Developing additional guidance around the aims of each workshop will help maintain program fidelity while allowing facilitators to adapt to their unique setting.

4. **Relationships based on trust among the program team, local implementers, and participants are necessary for adequate implementation of the program.** Program leaders recognized the need to be more transparent about data collection, reporting, and monitoring processes and develop a relationship with the implementers that allowed them to collaborate and help achieve their common goal.

5. **Monitoring and mentoring, based on positive relations and supportive feedback, are a must.** Monitoring helped the program team understand the differing realities in each community, why implementers deviated from the curriculum, and how to adjust the workshops to maximize relevance. The program also recognized the initial training may have been too limited; and therefore, mentoring visits provided an opportunity to continue to build facilitators' skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

The Program for Children and Families Strong from the Start - Dam Len Phaka can indeed give children wings. Participation in the program led to gains in children's socio-emotional development and overall school readiness; gains that were further supported by parents' increased use of developmentally supportive activities. Together, these results increase the likelihood that Roma children will grow up in enabling environments and are able to reach their potential. What are policymakers to do with this exciting new information?

1. **Support and expand programming in the 15 existing communities.** Expanding services in already-served communities is a smart investment as it draws on the expertise and relationships the program has already built, likely improving outcomes for newly served parents and children, as well as reinforcing positive behaviors for returning families. Furthermore, it offers the opportunity to:
   - **Continue to hone the program** and learn more about the more about the optimal number and ratio of parent, child, and joint workshops; add context-driven workshop activities to the curriculum; and improve training, monitoring, and supervision practices.
   - **Strengthen the capacity of RNGOs or other implementers,** increasing program efficacy, , as well as building their capacity to become better advocates, resources, and service delivery partners.
   - **Build trust within the community and reduce discrimination.** It takes time to build trust and dismantle the discrimination faced by Roma communities. However, this program can facilitate integration and reduce some of the discrimination and stigmatization Roma families currently face in schools and other services, particularly if it seeks to serve all in-need populations.
2. **Support the expansion of the program in other communities.** Despite implementation challenges, the program successfully demonstrated the ability to scale. Efforts to do so further should be explored and funding made available, but efforts should adhere to the lessons learned. Consider the following criteria for scaling:
   - **A pre-existing, well-regarding RNGO in the community.**
   - **Demand for the program from the RNGO and community members.**
   - **Adequate time and financial support for training, monitoring, and mentoring.**

Parents want more Strong from the Start!

Specifically, they recommend:

- Extend the program – more years and more workshops per year
- Include older, school-aged children
- Include more activities, such as the excursions and visits
- Include more joint workshops where parents and children participate together
- Include more activities that acknowledge their cumulative efforts, like the 'final show'
- Include non-Roma Serbian families to increase integration of Roma families in the local community

"Everything was great about the program, but I have just one suggestion. To include Serbian parents as well. So, they bring Serbian children. Yes, that would be good. To exchange experiences with them also, for children to play together. So that they can see that Serbian children can play with Roma children."

– PROGRAM PARENT

3. **Establish linkages between the program and the local school systems and explore adapted delivery models, such offering the program for students not attending preschool.** The program could target children aged 3 to 5 before they enter the obligatory preschool or serve as a catch-up for those not attending preschool or other early learning opportunities. Linking with schools could also improve teachers' ability to provide child-friendly, responsive, and stigma-free environments.

4. **Coordinate with other home visiting, parenting, or community services to ensure alignment and avoid duplication.** Efforts should be made to assess what services are currently in place and what the gaps are in each community, then adapt program services accordingly. In many cases, if providers coordinate and communicate, then there is an opportunity align or reinforce messaging, as well as increase access to needed services through referrals.

5. **Determine a pathway for on-going government funding for the program.** The government should assume responsibility for the funding of this program to ensure sustainability and demonstrate its commitment to giving all Serbians the best possible start.

6. **Invest in rigorous data collection and research to broaden the evidence base on Roma communities.** There is limited evidence on effective programming in Roma communities, particularly on parenting programs. Supporting more rigorous research, including longitudinal surveys, would not only complement momentum around the Nurturing Care Framework and inform policy and service delivery, but also position Serbia as a regional leader on Roma issues.

ENDNOTES

[1] 2014 Serbian Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Workshops for parents and children were often held in the same facility, in adjoining rooms.

[4] The impact evaluation was led by Luke Heinkel and Kavita Hatipoglu of Results for Development. The qualitative evaluation was led by DEEP DIVE and the costing study was led by Aleksandar Baucal at the University of Belgrade.

[5] 30 families in each of the 15 program settlements had already been selected to participate in the program. With the assistance of Romanipen and local RNGOs, the evaluators identified similarly situated comparison groups. This design limited spillover effects and the spring 2017 baseline evaluation confirmed the statistical similarity of the two groups, including on the evaluation's key measure: socio-emotional development.

[6] If families had more than one child between the ages of 3.5 to 6.5 years, the youngest child was selected to participate in the IDELA evaluation, increasing the likelihood that they would be available for all three phases of the evaluation.

[7] The findings presented below only apply to 374 families (parent-child pairs) who participated in all three stages of the evaluation. Data indicates that program attendance for these families stayed relatively constant across the two program phases.

[8] This is a mathematical construction to help understand effect sizes. Readers should not extrapolate actual years of development based on these numbers.

[9] Program activities were only active for two 8-month periods in 2017 and 2018. However, as the baseline was conducted in March 2017 and the endline in November 2018, the evaluation takes into account the full 21 months between the start and end of the program evaluation.

[10] This is a mathematical construction to help understand effect sizes. Readers should not extrapolate actual years of development based on these numbers.

In partnership with 14 Roma NGOs, the program was implemented by:

CENTER FOR INTERACTIVE PEDAGOGY

Romanipen OBRAZOVNO KULTURNA ZAJEDNICA ROMA